

SPECIAL SESSION ---- ROANOKE CITY COUNCIL

May 1, 2003

7:00 p.m.

The Council of the City of Roanoke met in special session on Monday, May 1, 2003, at 7:00 p.m., in the Exhibit Hall, Roanoke Civic Center, 710 Williamson Road, N. E., City of Roanoke, with Mayor Ralph K. Smith presiding, pursuant to Resolution No. 36283-042103 adopted on Monday, April 21, 2003.

PRESENT: Council Members William D. Bestpitch, M. Rupert Cutler, Alfred T. Dowe, Jr., Linda F. Wyatt, and Mayor Ralph K. Smith-----5.

ABSENT: Council Members William H. Carder and C. Nelson Harris-----2.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Darlene L. Burcham, City Manager; William M. Hackworth, City Attorney; Jesse A. Hall, Director of Finance; and Mary F. Parker, City Clerk.

The invocation was delivered by Council Member William D. Bestpitch.

The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America was led by Mayor Smith.

BUDGET-COUNCIL-TAXES-HOUSING/AUTHORITY-SEWERS AND STORM DRAINS-ROANOKE CIVIC CENTER: The Mayor advised that the special meeting was called for the purpose of conducting public hearings on the recommended 2003-04 HUD funding budget, the recommended fiscal year 2003-04 City budget, proposed changes in the City's sewer rates and proposed changes in local tax levies; i.e.: admissions tax, E-911 surcharge and short term rental tax.

The Mayor advised remarks by speakers will be limited to three minutes each.

The Mayor announced that the first public hearing pertains to the HUD budget which recommends an allocation of \$4,028,637.00 in Community Development Block Grant funds, and HOME Investment Partnership and Emergency Shelter Grant funds; whereupon, he opened the floor for comments.

The City Clerk advised that no persons had signed up to speak to the item; whereupon, the Mayor declared the public hearing closed.

The Mayor advised the next public hearing pertains to the recommended fiscal year 2003-04 City budget, totaling \$204.7 million; whereupon, he called upon the following persons to speak:

Ms. Angela Norman, 1731 Michael Street, N. W., complimented the City management team for its hard work in the budget preparation process. She stated that as is the case with personal budgets, when needs exceed the supply of dollars, additional revenues must be generated. She expressed concern for those citizens who live on fixed incomes and their ability to pay the additional taxes that are proposed by the City, and suggested that the City consider a discount plan for the benefit of those citizens who cannot afford to pay the additional taxes. She commended Council Members on their efforts to decrease the Council's budget; however, the percentage of funds spent on local mileage or personal cellular telephones for City business is only a fraction of the costs compared to the large percentage of funds expended by the City to hire consultants. She thanked the City Manager for not terminating any full-time City employees from their positions; however, the proposed budget provides for a certain class of City employees to receive additional compensation for specialized training and for participation in community activities. She stated that it is important to remember that City employees are public servants; the City Manager currently has the authority to approve additional compensation for any City employee based on a Personnel Operating Procedure and the recommended 2004 budget provides another window of opportunity for certain salaries to be compounded. She added that City employees are fairly compensated for their work in remuneration and in benefits; and a freeze should be imposed to eliminate future bonuses or other forms of compensation, except merit pay increases, until the City is in a better financial condition. In view of budget cuts, she inquired if it is feasible to continue the police mounted patrol unit at this time.

Ray Leven, 4251 Lake Drive, S. W., President of the Roanoke Bar Association, requested that the Roanoke Law Library be considered in the City's budget process for additional funds. He advised that the Law Library is made up of a collection that was donated to the City from the Roanoke Bar Association, and maintained by the City in the Courts Building; and the Roanoke Bar Association has proposed to donate \$3,500.00 to support the collection, which, in the past has been supported solely by court filing fees authorized by the General Assembly. He explained that filing fees have decreased due to less litigation and requested that Council consider augmenting the fees in the amount of \$20,000.00 - \$30,000.00 per year to maintain the Law Library collection. He stated that if subscriptions are allowed to expire, the Law Library collection will become obsolete; and the Roanoke Bar Association has sent a resolution to the General Assembly requesting that filing fees be increased to assist in maintaining the collection and the local Bar Association is working with other Bar Associations throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia to encourage an increase in the filing fees statewide, so that collections will be properly maintained. He advised that the Law Library provides access to the courts for the public; at this point, attorneys are no longer primary users of the Law Library; many attorneys perform their research electronically; and the public, through the small claims courts, is encouraged to take more responsibility and the Law Library provides that avenue.

Rodney Jordan, 1115 Patterson Avenue, S. W., representing firefighters and paramedics, advised that the City Manager has proposed a reduction in fire service personnel; in 2003 budget study discussions, Council rejected a proposal of the City Manager to cut three positions from Fire Suppression; however, for fiscal year 2004, a different approach is proposed in which Council is requested to unfund six Fire Suppression positions. He stated that the Fire administration has advised that it

intends to hire eight new recruits for the next recruit academy; however, if Council rejects the unfunding of the six positions, 14 recruits would be hired for the next academy. He advised that on April 7, 2003, Council approved approximately \$265,000.00 to proceed with relocation of No. 1 Fire Station, a project with an estimated cost of \$4.5 million; and the budget proposal suggests construction a multi-million dollar facility, while proposing to cut the very positions that will be housed in the facility. He asked the following question: When a Fire Department operates at or near minimum staffing levels, what happens when personnel attend mandatory training, use sick leave, have extended illness, retire or resign? He responded that the answer to the question is: Fire companies are marked out of service, and in recent months due to staffing inadequacies, apparatus have been taken out of service for extended periods of time, equipment has been manned with a minimum of three personnel per rig, and part-time EMS employees have been used to operate equipment. He stated that if citizens and businesses are the employer, should they not be informed when fire protection is reduced because there is not enough personnel to man the equipment; is a false sense of security being created when citizens see equipment parked at a fire station, but there are no personnel inside the station to respond to an emergency; and should signs be posted on station doors to let citizens know when a fire apparatus is out of service. In conclusion, he requested that Council reject the City Manager's proposal to reduce the number of firefighters, or any public safety personnel, whether the terminology is to "cut" or to "unfund" the position; that Council send a strong message that public safety is a top priority, and any future recommendations concerning staffing should be to strengthen, not weaken, essential services of Fire, EMS, and law enforcement.

Mr. E. Duane Howard, 508 Walnut Avenue, S. W. concurred in the remarks of the previous speaker. He commended the Fire/EMS Department on the level of service they provide for the citizens of Roanoke and spoke in support of a pay increase for fire personnel. He asked that Council deny the City Manager's recommendation to unfund the six positions.

Ms. Estelle McCadden, 2128 Mercer Avenue, N. W., expressed concern with regard to tax increases and other taxes related to citizens living on a fixed income. She asked that fire safety positions remain intact and that citizens be allowed more input into the budget preparation process before the fiscal year budget reaches the public hearing phase, because under the current procedure, by the time citizens address Council at the public hearing, the fiscal year budget has been established.

Ms. Zoe Hewitt-Stennett, 3531 Peters Creek Road, N. W., requested that no positions be eliminated in public safety. She stated that the City's first priority should be to its Fire Department, Police Department and Sheriff's Department.

Mr. Robert Gravely, 3360 Hershberger Road, N. W., addressed issues regarding the use of taxpayers' dollars for new businesses, the City's high crime rate, the need to improve Roanoke's neighborhoods, better pay for City employees so that the average employee can afford to purchase a home, the need for more programs leading to home ownership, and the hardship imposed on Roanoke's elderly citizens who live on fixed incomes as a result of the tax increase for water and sewage treatment.

Ms. Evelyn D. Bethel, 35 Patton Avenue, N. E., requested that the safety of the citizens of Lincoln Terrace be enhanced by including funds in the 2004 City budget for screen doors, and advised that a request has been previously submitted to the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority without success. She called attention to the importance of public safety positions; citizens of Roanoke should be informed about the future of Roanoke's fire stations; and funds should be included in the City's budget to fund a study by the Virginia Fire Association on the City's proposal to close certain fire stations. She stated that a multiplex fire station does not afford the level of safety that is necessary for the many sections of Roanoke; and northwest Roanoke consists of an extremely large area and citizens should be informed as to the location of a proposed new station. She stated that the City's budget would be better used if existing fire stations are renovated and manned with an adequate number of personnel.

There being no further speakers, the Mayor declared the public hearing closed.

The Mayor spoke to the issue of expenses incurred by the Mayor's Office in speech writing, cellular telephone and local mileage reimbursement. He stated that the Council, acting as the Budget and Planning Committee, voted to reduce the budget for professional speech writing to \$2,500.00 per year and to eliminate reimbursement for cellular telephone expenses and local mileage reimbursement related to City business. He added that during his tenure as Mayor, he has spent less funds on speech writing and local mileage reimbursement than previous Mayors. He called attention to the precedent that has been set by the Council because a future Mayor may not be in a financial position to pay his or her own travel and cellular telephone expenses relative to City business.

The Mayor introduced the next public hearing with regard to proposed changes to the City's sewer rates.

Ms. Estelle McCadden, 2128 Mercer Avenue, N. W., expressed concern with regard to proposed increases in the sewer and water rates and the hardship that the proposed increases will create for those persons living on a fixed income. She stated that citizens know that money is required to operate the City, but there should be a limit on what taxpayers are expected to fund. She advised that persons living on fixed incomes will be taxed to the point that they can no longer afford to live in the City of Roanoke.

Ms. Evelyn D. Bethel, 35 Patton Avenue, N. E., requested that Council rescind its previous action to appropriate funds for a branding initiative and allocate those funds for the purpose of helping citizens pay for increased sewage treatment rates. She stated that by treating its elderly citizens with respect and improving its neighborhoods, the City of Roanoke will draw prospective new businesses and young people to the area.

No other citizens wishing to be heard, the Mayor declared the public hearing closed.

The Mayor advised the next public hearing pertained to changes in the admissions tax, the E-911 surcharge, and the short-term rental tax.

Mr. E. Duane Howard, 508 Walnut Avenue, S. W., concurred in the remarks of Ms. Bethel and Ms. McCadden. He, too, expressed concern with regard to imposing additional taxes on persons living on a fixed income. He spoke specifically to the E-911 surcharge on telephone bills which are already unaffordable for many citizens.

Ms. Evelyn D. Bethel, 35 Patton Avenue, N. E., expressed concern with regard to the proposed increase in taxes for admissions and the E911 surcharge. She stated that an increase in the admissions tax will affect attendance at Roanoke Civic Center events; and advised that the City of Roanoke is a beautiful city, but the cost of living in Roanoke is becoming so high that citizens will begin to move to other localities. She stated that instead of appropriating funds for a branding study, the City should focus more on the kinds of actions that are necessary to attract new people to the Roanoke Valley.

Mr. Kevin Jenks, 1516 Maiden Lane, S. W., advised that the proposed increase in the admissions tax will cause irreparable harm to small businesses in downtown Roanoke. He stated that young people are going elsewhere for entertainment purposes, small bands that perform in downtown Roanoke night clubs are affected, and because clubs are required to pay licensing fees, etc., club owners and restaurant owners make very little profit from entertainment. He stated that since September 11, 2001, and because of the threat of SARS and terrorism, less people eat in restaurants which, in turn, affects the ability of restaurant owners to meet their expenses.

It was clarified that the proposed change in the admissions tax for private businesses will represent a reduction from 6 per cent to 5.5 per cent; therefore, it is not proposed to increase the admissions tax, although the City is required to hold a public hearing on any proposed change.

There being no further speakers, the Mayor declared the public hearing closed.

There being no further business, the Mayor declared the meeting adjourned at 7:50 p.m.

A P P R O V E D

ATTEST:

Mary F. Parker
City Clerk

Ralph K. Smith
Mayor

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OFFICERS PRESENT: Darlene L. Burcham, City Manager; William M. Hackworth, City Attorney; Jesse A. Hall, Director of Finance; and Mary F. Parker, City Clerk.

BUDGET-COUNCIL-TAXES: The Mayor advised that the purpose of the special meeting was to receive the views of citizens on the City's real property tax rate. He stated that the City Manager's proposed 2004 fiscal year budget includes a real property tax rate of \$1.21 per \$100.00 of assessed value, which is the current tax rate for fiscal year 2002-03.

The Mayor inquired if there were persons in attendance who would like to speak in connection with matter; whereupon, the City Clerk advised that no person had registered to speak.

The Mayor declared the public hearing closed.

The Mayor advised that Council will convene in budget study session on Wednesday, May 7, 2003, at 8:30 a.m., in the Emergency Operations Center Conference Room, Room 159, Noel C. Taylor Municipal Building; and Council will reconvene in budget study session on Thursday, May 8, at 8:30 a.m., with the School Board, followed by continuation of the Council's budget study session, with a goal of sending the fiscal year 2004 budget back to the City Manager for any necessary adjustments and for preparation of the appropriate measures for adoption by Council on Monday, May 12, 2003 at 9:00 a.m., in the City Council Chamber.

There being no further business, the Mayor declared the special meeting adjourned at 7:55 p.m.

A P P R O V E D

ATTEST:

Mary F. Parker
City Clerk

Ralph K. Smith
Mayor
